

# Naturalistic Explanations of Religious Beliefs

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## Abstract

Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican as well as Janusz Salomon put forward versions of supernaturalism that avoid the existence of a religion which alone provides the true revelation and the only way to salvation and which teaches that God acted in this world. Their rejection of revealed, exclusive religion is based on an argument from religious diversity and an argument from natural explanations of religious phenomena. These two together form the ‘common-core/diversity dilemma’. In this article I refute these two arguments by arguing that explaining the origin of belief in supernatural agents does not provide a reason for not believing in the existence of supernatural agents.

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# 1 The thesis of this article

(1.1) In this article I shall argue that both arguments against first-order supernaturalism that are put forward by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican (2015) and that are accepted by Janusz Salamon (2015) are unsuccessful and thus are no reasons for accepting either Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's 'second-order supernaturalism' or Salamon's 'agatheism'.

(1.2) 'First-order supernaturalism' consists of 'supernaturalist beliefs that claim unique authority for some particular religious tradition in preference to all others' (Thornhill-Miller and Millican 2015, p. 3). Thornhill-Miller and Millican contrast this with 'second-order supernaturalism, which maintains that the universe in general, and the religious sensitivities of humanity in particular, have been formed by supernatural powers working through natural processes.' This is what Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) called 'natural religion'. Like Mendelssohn and Lessing, Thornhill-Miller and Millican as well as Salamon think that a religion, like Christianity, that claims that this religion alone is based on true revelation and provides salvation and that God acted in this world is irrational.

(1.3) The two arguments against first-order supernaturalism constitute the horns of the 'common core/diversity dilemma' (CCDD), put forward by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican:

[The first, oppositional or sceptical, horn:] That in so far as religious phenomena (e.g. miracle reports, religious experiences, or other apparent perceptions of supernatural agency) point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines

30 their evidential force; [The second, common-core or naturalistic, horn:] while in so far as such phenomena involve a ‘common core’ of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause for these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural. (3)

35 The authors apply the first horn to miracles that are responses to prayers and the second horn to religious experiences. (21) Let me respond to both horns.

## 2 The argument from conflicting reports against first-order supernaturalism

40 (2.1) We can summarise the authors’ statement of the first horn as follows:

45 ‘Prayer is popularly attributed with the power to effect medical cures in many *different* religions, and is commonly understood within them as evidence of specific religious truth. Yet religions conflict on the various specifics, so such evidential claims cannot reasonably be accepted unless they have solid empirical backing to distinguish them from the claims that they implicitly contradict. Without such differential support, the best that could be hoped for is evidence of prayer’s efficacy in general.’ (22) But ‘there  
50 is no scientifically discernible effect for intercessory prayer as assessed in controlled studies.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Masters et al. 2006, p. 21 quoted in 2015, p. 21. By contrast, Brown et al. 2010, using a different methodology, comes to a different conclusion: ‘This study found a significant effect of PIP [proximal intercessory prayer] on auditory function across the tested population ( $P < 0.003$ ).’ Swinburne 2006 argues that we should not expect that God would respond to prayers in controlled studies. Brown 2012, ch. 2 discusses how healings through divine intervention can be discovered. Keener 2011, chs. 7–9 presents contemporary healing reports from various cultures.

(2.2) I respond first that although responses to petitionary prayer can provide evidence for the existence of God or for the truth of a religion, the theist does not have to hold that there is such evidence. God may choose not to answer prayer in a visible and provable way. He may answer prayers only when not being subjected to controlled studies, he may respond in a non-detectable way, or he may, for various reasons, not respond at all. Christians believe that God sometimes heals people in response to prayer, but the evidence for this is often not strong enough to raise the probability of the existence of God or of Christian doctrine significantly for someone who attributes a low prior probability to Christian doctrine (i. e. someone who does not believe Christian doctrine already). The main purpose of these healings is presumably the health of the person and the interaction between God and the person. Even the person himself often does not know with certainty whether he was healed through divine intervention. If somebody has cancer and is healed after his and others' petitionary prayer in a way that surprises all the doctors, that is a good reason for believing that God intervened, but it could also have been a spontaneous healing or an effect of psychological changes, because these things happen sometimes. In either case the person has a reason for thanking God.

(2.3) Responses to prayer need not be evidence for the truth of a specific religion. Even if there is only one religion that provides the true revelation and salvation, God can also answer the prayers of people who have not heard the true revelation or who have not accepted it. Therefore it is not true that the 'diversity and mutual opposition [of the reports of responses to prayer] undermines their evidential force.'

(2.4) Even if reports about answers to prayers would conflict with each other because they are supposed to confirm the religion in which they are reported, it could be that the reports in one reli-

85 gion are true and those in the other religions are false. Thornhill-Miller and Millican provide no evidence for their claim that there are credible reports of responses to prayers that are in mutual opposition. However, even if something undermined the evidential force of reports of answers to prayers, that would not make  
90 much difference because no religion's rationality depends on such reports.

(2.5) More relevant here, but not discussed by Thornhill-Miller and Millican, are other miracles, in particular the resurrection of Jesus. It is often argued that there is strong evidence for it.<sup>2</sup>

95 If there were equally much evidence for a miracle that would confirm a different, conflicting religion, then in at least one case there would be misleading evidence. However, as far as I can see there are no such conflicting miracle reports. And even if something undermined the evidential force of the reports of the  
100 resurrection of Jesus, that would undermine only one item of evidence for the existence of God among many. One can believe in Jesus' resurrection without believing that the historical evidence for it is strong enough to convince somebody who attributes a low prior probability to the existence of God.

105 I conclude that the first horn of the CCDD provides no good reasons for believing that there is no true first-order supernaturalism.

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<sup>2</sup>Swinburne 2003, T. McGrew and L. McGrew 2012, Wright 2003, Craig 2000, Habermas and Licona 2004.

### 3 The argument from biases against first-order supernaturalism

(3.1) We can summarise the authors' statement of the second horn as follows:

There is a common core of religious experiences that turn out to be explicable in naturalistic terms. 'Recent research in the cognitive science of religion [...] provides a persuasive naturalistic explanation for the near-universal tendency to attribute events to supernatural agents.' (28) First, 'our *hypersensitive agency detection device* (HADD) is the human cognitive operator that has been postulated to explain why it is normal for us to see agency rather than randomness everywhere in the world around us: why we see faces in clouds, attribute illness and bad weather to witchcraft, and perceive the hand of fate in our lives rather than the action of abstract and impersonal forces. The evolutionary advantage of its hyperactivity is commonly explained with the observation that the cost of perceiving more agents than actually exist (e.g. mistaking wind in the tall grass for a predator) is low, while perceiving too few agents (e.g. mistaking a predator for wind) would, at some point, be fatal.' (29) Second, 'Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the capacity to attribute mental states – such as beliefs, desires, and intentions – to oneself and to others.' (29) 'we consistently overextend ToM, projecting humanlike qualities of consciousness even to inanimate objects and abstract forces, and are thus predisposed to see gods, spirits, witches and other agents – whether visible or invisible – acting in the world.' (30) 'HADD and ToM together lead us to find specific kinds of meaning and design in randomness, to see the action of invisible agents even in unplanned, non-intentional processes, and to attempt to relate to such agents as we would to other intentional beings. Working together, these two processes – all by

themselves – seem to provide a reasonably persuasive naturalistic explanation for the belief in invisible, intelligent supernatural agents like the gods and spirits found universally across human cultures.’ (30)

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Now we can understand better their claim concerning CCDD: ‘The contradictions between different religious belief systems, in conjunction with new understandings of the cognitive forces that shape their common features, persuasively challenge the rationality of most kinds of supernatural belief.’ (1)

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(3.2) In reply, I first ask whether these biases exist. They certainly exist in some people in some situations. But do they exist in all people, and are they at work in all religious experiences and beliefs? Many of us never attributed illness or bad weather to witchcraft. Some people seem to have the opposite bias. They believe that the universe, the animals and we human beings came into being just by material causal processes.

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(3.3) There are things or events that are caused by agency, and other things that are caused by non-personal causes. There are agents with bodies, and, most people believe, there are bodiless agents, such as God, angels, demons, ghosts. If a person believes in agents that do not exist, that can be due to a bias or due to some other error, such as certain beliefs in his environment. However, you can discover the existence of a bias only if you make the assumption that beliefs in question are false and if they are in fact false. If you assume that there are no demons in waterfalls and that thunder is not caused by some demon or god, then you can be justified in assuming that somebody who believes in such demons has a bias to believe in more agents than actually exist. But you cannot use the hypothesis of a belief bias in order to defeat the truth of beliefs on whose falsity you based the bias hypothesis. So you cannot use HADD and ToM for

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defeating beliefs in demons or God if the theories of HADD and ToM are based on the assumption that there are no bodiless agents. Can the theories of HADD and ToM be justified without assuming that there are no bodiless agents? They certainly need the assumption that some beliefs about bodiless agents are false, for example the belief that thunder is caused by a god. But does this assumption justify belief in a bias towards believing in more agents than actually exist that is at work in all beliefs in agents? Imagine that when you come home you discover that your living room is in a mess, the content of all drawers is on the floor, and the door is open with a broken lock. If you then believe that a person broke in in order to steal, are there HADD and ToM at work? Should you question your conclusion that there was an intruder, thinking that you should ‘systematically compensate’ (36) for your bias towards believing in actions where there are none? If you believe that you have a bias towards beliefs of kind P, then you should not just simply lower the credence of all your P-beliefs. Instead, you should gather evidence and perceptual data and revise your P-beliefs in their light. In the case of the intruder, not much will change. Likewise, perhaps belief in God remains unchanged if the believer tries hard to base it on evidence. Perhaps it has always been based on evidence. The reference to HADD and ToM does nothing to show that it is not.

(3.4) Even if we accept that HADD and ToM exist, we should conclude only that we must try hard to base our beliefs about God and religion on evidence and perception. That is, we should search for all our beliefs and perceptual experiences that support propositions about God or religion and try to draw the right conclusions from them. Even if we accept that HADD and ToM exist it is wrong to simply lower our credence in all our beliefs in actions or agents, or in our beliefs in bodiless agents. It would



205 also be wrong to ascribe to all beliefs in bodiless agents a lower  
 probability than the one they have in virtue of the evidence and  
 the perceptual experiences. Instead, if we accept that HADD  
 and ToM exist, we should make an effort to base our beliefs  
 210 about God, ghosts, demons, and religion on the evidence and  
 on perceptual experiences. We should make this effort anyway.  
 Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's assumption that 'sceptical con-  
 siderations such as the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma' (46)  
 defeat, or lower the probability of, beliefs in bodiless agents and  
 in supernatural interventions is wrong.

215 (3.5) More simply put, Thornhill-Miller and Millican commit a  
 genetic fallacy when they think that putting forward a natural-  
 istic explanation of beliefs in supernatural agents or supernatural  
 actions supports the assumption that these beliefs are false. Say-  
 ing that belief in God is caused by a bias to believe in more agents  
 220 than there are does nothing to support the view that there is no  
 God. If you have good reasons for believing that there is no God,  
 then you may be justified in believing that belief in God is often  
 caused by HADD or ToM. But you cannot use HADD or ToM in  
 order to defend rationally the belief that there is not God or that  
 225 first-order supernaturalism is false. For that you would need to  
 defeat the usual arguments for God's existence or to put forward  
 evidence against the existence of God, for example the evil in  
 this world. HADD and ToM are not among the evidence for or  
 against the existence of God.

230 (3.6) We can see why this is so also by considering for what  
 naturalistic explanations of beliefs or experiences are relevant.  
 A naturalistic explanation of a belief in *p* can undermine the  
 claim that the existence of belief in *p* is evidence for the truth  
 of *p*. For example, Jesus' disciples believed not only that Jesus  
 235 rose from the dead but that they believe that Jesus rose and is  
 the saviour *because* they saw the risen Jesus. The resurrection

and the encounters explain how the disciples came to acquire this belief. If it is hard to explain the existence of this belief in another way, then the belief is evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. If, on the other hand, there is a plausible account of how the disciples might have acquired this belief even though Jesus did in fact not rise from the dead, then the belief is not evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Only in special cases is some people's belief in p evidence for the truth of p. In all other cases putting forward an explanation how the belief in p might have emerged does nothing to show that p is false and does not justify not believing p.

(3.7) I conclude that the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma, and the arguments from diversity and from naturalistic explanations of religious phenomena included in it, does not defeat, or lower the probability of, any beliefs in supernatural agents and supernatural actions. These arguments therefore do not support preferring second-order supernaturalism or Salamon's agatheism to first-order supernaturalism, for example Christian doctrine. Considerations about what causes religious beliefs and about religious diversity are not relevant for finding out the truth about God. Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's mistake (and many other critics of revealed religion made this mistake) is that they try to refute revealed religion in some other way than by examining the evidence, and thus the various arguments, for or against the existence of God and the evidence for or against Christian doctrine.

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